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ABSTRACT

Special consideration should be given to curriculum development in basic-speech-communication classrooms which have non-native speakers of English as students. Fluency, student grouping, background diversity, and degrees of freedom of speech all affect the ability and achievement of non-native English-speaking students in such classrooms. A hybrid speech course, designed to ease non-native English-speakers into the mainstream of the basic communication classroom, includes such activities as exposure to various communication forms; practical applications of interpersonal communication skills; group discussion through nonverbal, problem-solving, and leadership exercises; and public speaking. (Author/CB)

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Developing A Public Speaking Course For Non-Native Speakers of English: Problems and Approaches

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Abstract

Special considerations should be given to curriculum development in the basic-speech-communication classroom where non-native speakers of English are students. The first part of this paper focuses on some problems non-native speakers of English may have in the basic-communication course. The problems discussed are fluency, student grouping, background diversity, and degrees of freedom of speech. The second half of the article gives an outline for a hybrid speech course. Activities for the hybrid course are designed to ease non-native speakers of English into the main stream of the basic-communication classroom. (96 words)

Developing A Public Speaking Course For Non-Native Speakers of English: Problems and Approaches

The sight of an international student on college campuses is no longer a rarity; it is an accepted standard. It is not unusual to have students from several countries in one classroom. International students, who are most often non-native speakers of English, take communication courses for a number of reasons. Erhart (1976) states "Students enroll in speech courses for various reasons and can be located on many points across a motivation continuum. Some enroll because a course is required" (p. 245).

International students at Heidelberg College gave the following responses when asked why they had enrolled in a basic-communication course: "it's a requirement," "to help prepare me for the 'outside world'," "to gain knowledge about how to mix with other people and to practice English as a spoken language," "to hear other people's ideas," and "to become an efficient, less nervous speaker."[1]

Dennis (1979) in talking about the value of non-native speakers in the classroom says:

> The presence of foreign students is relevant to Americans also. This is one of the encouraging signs of global education. If we are becoming a global village . . . then we are all interdependent . . . . We are, whether we like it or not,

> part of each other for better or worse; we are part of each other for richer or poorer (p. 9).

Instructors in a multi-ethnic classroom, thus, have a complex task: not only must they teach the basic course, they must deal with the problems and joys of teaching international students. Instructors are also responsible for seeing that classrooms are places for an exchange of ideas and arenas for the development of friendships.

This paper will explore some of the problems of non-native speakers of English in the communication classroom. Because a hybrid course, very likely, best fits the needs of non-native speakers of English, this paper offers an outline for a hybrid course which incorporates effective approaches to teaching non-native speakers of English in the basic-communication course.

Problems of Non-Native Speakers of English

Fluency, clustering, alienation, test anxiety and background diversity are problems for international students. Although they face other problems as well in the basic-speech-communication classroom, these are the most commonly occurring ones.

The first problem is that non-native speakers of English are often worried about their fluency. Here are typical student comments: "I'd like to improve my use of the correct tense when speaking," "My big problem is English which is not my native tongue. Sometimes I cannot translate thoughts into the words I really want to say,"

"My goal is to get people to really get my message and be satisfied with my information," "I need to have more practice in speaking English." These comments make it clear that non-native speakers of English have more to worry about in the basic-communication course than communication anxiety. Fluency problems together with communication anxiety can turn a fair public speaker into a poor public speaker.

A second problem is that international students tend to cluster in classes. In one classroom that has students from four foreign countries, all of the international students sit on the same side of the room; students from the same country always sit next to each other. There are several reasons for this phenomena: (1) students often translate for each other during the class session; (2) students feel less intimidated when surrounded by people with whom they are familiar; and (3) helping one another is a way of survival. Shana'a (1978) feels that student grouping is culturally based. "Helping one another is a way of survival. Unless one has experienced this, it is difficult to comprehend and to equate this with our particular code of ethics" (p. 245).

A third problem is that non-native speakers of English often feel alienated from the rest of the class. They want to make friends with Americans but are unsure how to "make the leap." Sharpe sees the inability or reluctance of non-native and native speakers of English to develop friendships as an opportunity for the instructor to have positive input. She states ". . . by creating a supportive

peer group in the classroom the instructor will find it possible to inspire self-esteem, confidence, and independence" (1983, p. 15 instructor's manual).

A fourth problem is background diversity. Non-native speakers of English come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and a wide spectrum of political expertise and freedom. Shana'a (1978) states

> A final concern is that of the different degrees of freedom of speech. Even in countries known for free elections and participation by the citizens in government, there may not be the freedom of expression that is assumed natural and necessary by Americans (p. 246).

Instructors often take for granted that all students will feel the same degree of freedom of expression in the classroom. Positive encouragement by instructors will help lessen student fears of recrimination for topics they may choose to bring up in class.

The final problem is that international students usually have a high degree of test anxiety. Most have been selected to come to the United States because of their outstanding scholarship. However, some find it difficult to function in the United States classroom where their fluency rate is not comparable to native speakers of English. Poor grades are often reported to students' embassy or consulate. If students receive enough low grades, they may be asked to discontinue their studies and return home. In general, non-native speakers of English seem to fare better on subjective tests rather than objective tests. Here are some student

comments: "I prefer the subjective test. . . .I think that you learn much more when you can relate (text) information to yourself," "Essay is better because the person understands what he is writing about. But please take it easy on correcting it," "I prefer subjective because it will give us a chance to express our ideas. It also helps to improve my grammar," " In subjective (tests) at least we have freedom in answering. Although my answer may not fully meet the required answer at least we will receive some credits for it. Furthermore, Ms. Churchman, you might gain something from our answer--something you might not have thought of before."

Approaches

I feel that a hybrid course is best for non-native speakers of English for several reasons. First, students are exposed to various communication forms, not just public speaking. Second, international students often bring new dimensions and cultural differences to play in group problem solving, group leadership, and nonverbal exercises. Third, non-native speakers of English are often fascinated by the field of interpersonal communication, a theoretical approach they may not have been exposed to before.

In formulating the following hybrid course outline, I have chosen to follow the sequence of interpersonal communication, group discussion, and public speaking. This approach is best for non-native speakers of English for three reasons. First, non-native speakers of English are oriented to the communication classroom slowly. Second, the high-anxiety portion of the course (public

speaking) is saved until the end of the course. Because public speaking occurs last in the course, students are likely to feel more at ease with other class members, will have had practice in speaking in small group situations, and will have information on how interpersonal communication works. Third, non-native speakers of English will have a natural acclimation to class attitudes, class norms, and instructor expectations.

Interpersonal Communication

This section of the hybrid course will deal with some practical applications of interpersonal skills. A variety of exercises will prove useful. Students will use information that is readily available and applicable to them.

Ice breakers will encourage students to interact with and meet one another. Students will have a chance to find out information about other class members. These will be useful contacts for later during the public-speaking section of the course because students will be able to locate friendly faces in the audience.

A unit on roles could stress family interaction. Not only will non-native speakers of English be able to tell about these roles in their countries, American students will be able to add to the international students' storehouse of information about family roles in the United States. Non-native speakers of English are often curious about life styles of Americans. This unit therefore will be helpful for all students in the classroom: non-native speakers of English will receive valuable information, and students

from the United States can act as 'experts' in this area.

An exercise suggested by Sharpe (1984, p. 42) involves giving students a list of people along with their ages, marital status, occupation and the number of children they have. The students are asked to match who they think will make good friends based on the information they have been given. This exercise will encourage class discussion, and non-native speakers of English will be able to lend their unique cultural perspective to these exercises.

Next, some dyadic exercises to get everyone paired up and talking would be good. Brief interviews will work well in this section, too. Everyone in the class will receive questions they must get answers to. It is important to make sure no international students are paired for this exercise.

Some non-native speakers of English will continue their education in the United States. Others will be seeking employment in the United States. Therefore, a unit on employment interviewing will be of interest to all students in the classroom.

Gaston (1984) outlines a "Family Tree" exercise. In this exercise, students are asked to ". . . draw diagrams of the structure of their families. They question each other about their families, leading to an awareness of how their cultures shape the concept of 'family'"(p. 15).

Gaston (1984, p. 39) suggests using the "Stereotypes" activity for increased class participation. In this exercise, large sheets of paper are hung in the classroom. Each country represented

in the classroom has it's name printed on one of the sheets of paper. Students are asked to circulate around the room and draw their impression of the stereotypes of that particular country. The drawings are then used to stimulate class discussion. Gaston says "I have never had anyone get angry--probably because everyone is a 'victim'" (p. 40).

Group Discussion

The next segment of the hybrid course to be considered is group discussion. While there are may topics which can be discussed in the small-group context, three work especially well for non-native speakers of English. They are (1) nonverbal exercises, (2) problem-solving exercises, and (3) leadership exercises.

Nonverbal exercises can involve the entire class. Students should by this time in the course have a familiarity with one another, and should be ready to function in groups. Since nonverbal exercises do not depend on spoken language for success, non-native speakers of English should feel comfortable in the nonverbal arena. There is an added benefit that most students have not done nonverbal exercises previously, so all students will begin nonverbal work at the entry level.

One assignment that works well is to have the students form small groups and act out a nonverbal skit. The skit can be one to two minutes in duration. After the skit is completed, class members can interpret the skit verbally.

Weaver (1985, pp. 256-259) suggests use of a "Card Game For Practicing

Nonverbal Communication". In this game, students are required to show different emotions and sentiments nonverbally.

"Broken Squares" is another exercise which lends itself well to this section (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1969, pp. 24-29). Groups receive a packet of pieces which will form several squares. Students may give other members of their group pieces, but may not ask for pieces, or use any verbal communication.

Garcia (1982, p. 200) gives guidelines for an open-ended activity. In this exercise, a student is found passing answers during an exam. Garcia provides several process questions at the end of the activity. These questions touch on human rights, cultural preference, and cultural understanding. Students must then provide an ending of their own to the story after class discussion.

Leadership exercises can also be used well in the group segment. Exercises which highlight cultural approaches usually are well received by students. In one exercise, students are divided into groups and asked to list the ten greatest leaders in the world. Groups share their findings with the class. A second exercise asks groups to generate a list of the five greatest leaders is history. They can then list the traits of each leader.

Public Speaking

The public speaking unit highlights two areas: (1) student critiques, and (2) student speeches. Distributing note cards in class for anonymous student critiques of speakers helps to ease feelings of alienation that non-native speakers of English experience.

These critiques can be read aloud in class. In this way, the international student can participate in the class. Because they must be more attentive to fellow speakers to ensure getting the full meaning of the speech, non-native speakers of English often note in public speakers what Americans tend to miss simply because they are looking for different verbal as well as nonverbal speaker cues.

Impromptu, informative, and demonstration speeches are valuable for all beginning speakers. They can be tailored to fit the needs of non-native speakers of English quite readily.

Since impromptu speeches have little preparation time, all students are on equal footing. Non-native speakers of English may worry that they have not spent enough time preparing for a speech. Impromptu speeches help to develop the students ability to think and speak quickly in front of an audience. Bytwerk (1985) suggests giving students, ". . . a topic which makes them furious. . . provide(s) students with rolled-up newspapers, which they are encouraged to apply to the table before them. . . .The most stubbornly monotonic speaker can display startling energy during this assignment. . .(p. 149).

When beginning a unit on informative speaking, it may be helpful to brainstorm in class for topics for speakers. Sometimes students will bring up topics they would like to hear international students talk about. Non-native speakers of English may be relieved to find out the topic for an informative speech is common knowledge to them, and that they are their own best resources.

Gaston (1984) suggests the concept of "Country Talks."

> Using the classroom walls, put up a large piece of paper for each country represented in the class. The name of a country is written at the top of the paper. Ask the students to move around the room and write questions they might have on each of the countries (p. 36).

This exercise should give each international student several topics to consider for an informative speech.

Speeches of demonstration allow students to bring objects with which they are familiar into the classroom. Having a familiar object to talk about can help lessen speaker anxiety. Non-native speakers of English seem to have a high degree to speaker anxiety, which is shaped by worries about fluency and grammar. While a familiar object or demonstration about something with which one is familiar will not erase speaker anxiety entirely, it will help to ease these feelings.

Summary

This article has given some of the common problems non-native speakers of English face in a basic-communication classroom. Where possible, explanations for these problems have been offered. An outline for a hybrid course is suggested to best satisfy the needs of non-native speakers of English in the classroom situation. The underlying assumption has been that there will be native as well as non-native speakers of English in the classroom.

The world is getting smaller and smaller. Students have opportunities for travel more now than ever before. Students

now major in fields such as international business, and will have the opportunity to travel for business as well as pleasure. Meeting non-native speakers of English in the classroom is often the first exposure American students have had to non-native speakers of English. Powell and Avila (1969) make the point best in stating

> The task of future research, then, is to examine the cultural issues that are important to the cultural scene and plot a course that will celebrate ethnic diversity and enhance communication competency so that the individual and society are served" (p. 277).

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Footnote

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